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**Experts Wonder How Education Goals Will Be Met Article**

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President Barack Obama laid out new national goals Tuesday aimed at boosting high school and college graduation rates, but left education experts wondering on how he intends to reach his targets, and how much he is prepared to spend on them.

In his address to Congress, the president signaled a shift in federal education policy toward improving the skills of adults and work-force entrants, following an intense focus on boosting younger students' reading and mathematics attainment under the No Child Left Behind law, the centerpiece of the Bush administration's schools agenda.

Some observers had believed that education would stay on the back burner early in the Obama administration while the president grappled with the economic crisis. But the subject made it to the top tier of the address to Congress partly because Mr. Obama believes he must send Americans a message about the importance of education.

Reuters

Freshman Laurah Pollonais, left, and Dalicia Barker listen during a class at Spelman College in Atlanta Feb. 12.

"Of the many issues, this is one where he feels the bully pulpit needs to be used," a White House official said Wednesday.

In his speech Tuesday night, Mr. Obama said "dropping out of high school is no longer an option" and set a goal of the U.S. having the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by 2020.

According to the Paris-based Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, which tracks college-going among its 30 member countries, the U.S., at 30%, is tied for sixth place in college graduation among those 25 to 34 years of age, 2006 data show, behind such countries as Norway, South Korea and the Netherlands. OECD data suggest that the U.S. was No. 1 until around 2000, but has lost its edge as other countries have stepped up their efforts to promote higher education.

Kevin Carey, policy director of the Education Sector, a nonprofit Washington, D.C., think tank, said the U.S. hasn't been slipping but other countries have been improving. Regaining our former top position represents "a pretty reasonable goal," he says. "It's not moon-shot level."

In a broader OECD measure of adults 25 to 64, the U.S. stands second, also at 30%, just behind Norway -- but with time, the higher attainments among younger adults in other countries could erode the U.S. ranking.

While the No-Child law focused on bringing the poorest-performing students up to a basic level of proficiency, Mr. Obama signaled that he aims for all students to have the high-level skills they need to make it through high school and succeed in college. "That is raising the bar," said Jack Jennings, president of the Center on Education Policy, a Washington-based research group that tracks NCLB issues. "I just hope this is backed by real action and real resources."

During his presidential campaign, Mr. Obama said he would try to boost college readiness by increasing the number of students taking advanced-placement and college-level courses in high school and provide grants for high-school students seeking college-level credit at community colleges.

He also pledged to increase college-going rates by providing a \$4,000 tax credit to students who completed 100 hours of community service. The administration also plans to use funds from the stimulus bill to encourage states to acquire improved data-gathering systems that provide teachers with better information about the learning problems of individual students.

The Bush administration in its second term had begun increasing its focus on the high-school-dropout issue, and last year enacted a new regulation that requires all states to use the same formula to come up with their tally. As it stands, only three-quarters of high-school freshman will graduate after four years, according to the Education Department.

Jay P. Greene, head of the Department of Education Reform at the University of Arkansas, says the graduation rate has hovered at that level for decades, making it difficult for Mr. Obama to achieve his goal of producing a work force with 21st century skills.

Also, many of those who enter college are woefully unprepared and spend much of their time in remedial math and English courses. Mr.

Greene, whose research was eminent in spotlighting the dropout problem earlier this decade, praised Mr. Obama's goals of moving beyond mere proficiency, but said, "Unfortunately, it's not clear how you compete in the decathlon without learning how to walk first."

The Obama administration is likely to handle education differently from health care and energy, the other two domestic policy issues he singled out for attention in his speech. Health care and energy reforms both depend on major congressional action, and the president called on the Congress to push forward on both fronts. His budget, to be released Thursday, will detail the need to act in both.

The administration may be reasoning that education doesn't require a major legislative push. The Obama budget will include money for preschool and higher education, which the president noted on Tuesday. But it doesn't call for a major new set of reforms.

The NCLB law is overdue for reauthorization but Education Secretary Arne Duncan has said that he wants to review data and meet with experts before proposing any changes.

The administration also underscored its plans by making education a major part of the recently passed stimulus bill, which includes \$98 billion in education-related funding.

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